

**IMAG[IN]ING POTSDAMER PLATZ**

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Over the past fifteen years Berlin's Potsdamer Platz has experienced a nearly unprecedented level of redevelopment, transforming it from a bleak, empty ruin cut by the Berlin wall to an urban entertainment and commercial complex. Housing international corporations and designed by a slew of world-renowned architects, the site has played a large part in the architectural discourse of post-wall Berlin. Critical scholarship concerning the new Potsdamer Platz, however, has largely neglected the more complicated and discordant attributes of the architecture and planning, regarding the site as a superficial image of contrived urban tourist space and classifying it in a singular capacity. Synthesizing historical and critical texts and images with experiential research and analysis of the architecture and spatial relationships on Potsdamer Platz, I examine the various complexities, dissonances and ambiguities present within the site and the surrounding context of Berlin. Through this exploration I propose a new image of Potsdamer Platz, one that is multifaceted, fragmented and ultimately defined by layered discord rather than singularity.



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## **PREFACE**

Thanks to my loving parents, devoted professors and extraordinary advisor.

## **1.0 THE POPULAR IMAGE**

Of the twenty years since the fall of the Berlin wall, the new Potsdamer Platz has been completed for the last five, and construction on the adjacent Leipziger Platz is drawing to a close, signaling the end, at least physically, of the bleak, empty landscape left in the wake of the cold war. The dozens of cranes that helped garner Potsdamer Platz the title of Europe's largest construction site have dwindled in number to six or seven, scattered about the periphery, replaced by the widely publicized architectural models; the notorious Info Box turned inside out in three dimensions. The critical reception of the project's development primarily regards the new Potsdamer Platz as a superficial image of contrived urban tourist space, architectural commodification and the imposition of global consumer culture on what has often been labeled the heart of Berlin. But standing on the edge of Leipziger Platz, facing the completed square, the image becomes reality, material forms tangibly present. The reconstructed buildings on either side of Leipziger Platz narrow the viewer's eye down Potsdamerstrasse (fig. 1) and funnel vision toward the climbing structures. Beneath the towers the dueling Bahnhof stations' gridded orthogonal geometry frame the pedestrian base, channeling the view upward to the three towering buildings silhouetted against the empty sky (fig. 2). The vertical domain belongs solely to these rising figureheads. The dark, pointed structures of the DaimlerChrysler quarter surge onto the square at left, angular and opaque, opposite the sweeping glass, curvaceous and transparent façade of the Sony Center; this is Potsdamer Platz. This is the seminal image populating glossy architectural anthologies

and periodicals, tourist camera lenses and the profusion of Internet websites, blogs and photo albums. And yet, this is not the first time such an image of Potsdamer Platz has been presented.

## 2.0 THE PAINTED IMAGE

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Expressionist artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner produced a series of paintings documenting the street life of Berlin, a chief subject of which was prostitution and the potential ambiguity characteristic of the profession at that time. The women often operated in disguise, a necessity in the more popular areas such as along Friedrichstrasse or on Potsdamer Platz. Attired in the fashions of the period, they exhibited considerable discretion, a brief glance perhaps the sole gesture to a potential customer.<sup>1</sup> This ambiguity is especially apparent in Kirchner's *Potsdamer Platz* painting of 1914, which depicts two contrasting figures standing at the center of the square (fig. 3). At left is a woman clad in the raiment of a widow, dark and veiled, a guise that, after the war began, was appropriated by prostitutes as an apt concealment not only for its public acceptability, but also its notable capacity for discouraging questions from the authorities.<sup>2</sup> The government's lack of financial support for those widowed by the war further complicates the woman's identity; many widows were forced to engage in prostitution as a means of securing an income to feed and clothe their families after the war claimed their husband, and consequently their livelihood.<sup>3</sup> The proliferation of widows prostituting themselves and prostitutes posing as widows adds a multi- dimensionality to the

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<sup>1</sup> Haxthausen, Charles and Heindrun Suhr, eds., *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 80-81.

<sup>2</sup> Haxthausen, Charles and Heindrun Suhr, eds., *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis*, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Thank you to Barbara McCloskey and Susan Funkenstein for bringing my attention to this additional layer of ambiguity, a very important aspect of the period that informs the reading of Kirchner's work to a great extent.

figure in Kirchner's work, a figure that slips easily into either role. Her counterpart to the right, arrayed in blue and crowned with the feathery plumage attributed to prostitutes of the period,<sup>4</sup> presents a strikingly different image. Striding forth with a purposeful demeanor, her guise is that of a common woman, and while masking her identity, it leaves little of her figure, her merchandise, to the imagination. The curving contours, her certain but effortless posture, contrast with the widow's angular features, her bent arm and pointed expression, all portrayed in profile.

The discord central to Kirchner's painting, the conflicting cloaks of commerce at the center of Potsdamer Platz, is what, nearly a hundred years later, has come to define the image of Potsdamer Platz again. The assertive dissonance of Kirchner's two women punctuating Potsdamer Platz in 1914 can be seen again in the discord between the two complexes – DaimlerChrysler and Sony – which now straddle Potsdamerstrasse. From the abstracted geometric environment to the physical forms of the women, to their associated vacillating ambiguities, the painting is echoed by the new developments. The DaimlerChrysler quarter, much of its planning and architectural appearance governed by historical directives, is the widow, its exterior tethered to the past while underneath this guise resides the inherent function of a commercial tourist magnet, replete with shopping, dining and entertainment facilities. Veiled by opaque façades and clad in dark materials, the oblique architecture of the quarter belies its intended purpose. The neighboring Sony Center, by contrast, functions under no historical pretense, adopting the inexorably revealing modern garb of pure glass and steel, assuredly confident in its curving exterior. Yet the Sony complex relies on the same commercial axioms for its existence, its walls enclosing a plaza encircled by cinemas, cafés, stores and

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<sup>4</sup> Haxthausen, Charles and Heindrun Suhr, eds., *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis*, 81.



restaurants. This underlying element of a consumer driven tourist economy that forms the connecting *raison d'être* between the two architecturally dissonant developments is what ultimately has informed the image of Potsdamer Platz in critical scholarship. This portrayal however, ignores the most integral component of Potsdamer Platz, the architecture, itself multifaceted and rich with contradictions and ambiguities. Any attempt at categorizing Potsdamer Platz, and accordingly its architecture, in a singular capacity circumvents the reality that the development is anything but a single entity. Rather, I will argue, the new Potsdamer Platz presents a fragmentary image, one that cannot be classified under a collective heading or singular image. In order to evaluate the success of the new development, a much closer inspection of the architecture accommodated on the square is needed, one that considers the contradictions, dynamism and tragedy that demarcates its history.

### 3.0 THE HISTORICAL IMAGE

Potsdamer Platz traces its origins to the 1740s, when Prussian era expansion required the construction of a new excise wall in order to continue collecting taxes on goods entering the city. Consequently, three new gates were established to facilitate entry to the city, of which the Potsdam Gate swiftly became the busiest, built along the western edge of Leipziger Platz. The informal growth of the territory surrounding the gate contrasted sharply with the strict geometry of the adjacent Leipziger Platz, the messy agglomeration of culminating roads forming what subsequently became known as Potsdamer Platz. From the gate, the streets fanned outward to the west, delineating angular plots of land that helped mold the nascent urban space into the antithesis of the architectural formalism circumscribed about the octagon of Leipziger Platz (fig. 4). Over the ensuing years, the area continued to expand and assumed different identities as its popularity grew, evolving from a makeshift market to a wealthy residential district and, following the construction of the Potsdamer Bahnhof, an area replete with hotels, businesses, cultural attractions and culinary delights.<sup>5</sup> The organic growth that characterized the site throughout its evolution was not without contest, as architects repeatedly subjected Potsdamer Platz to civic monumentalism, although only on paper. Karl Friedrich Schinkel's 1814 Cathedral and Monument to the Wars of Liberation joined Leipziger Platz and Potsdamer Platz with an

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<sup>5</sup> Wilderotter, Hans, "Potsdamer Platz," in *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architektur für das neue Berlin*, eds. Yamin von Rauch and Jochen Visscher (Berlin: Jovis Verlagsbüro, 2000), 12-15.

enormous colonnade orbiting around a prodigious gothic cathedral, the spire of which was to rise over a thousand feet, a height comparable to that of the Chrysler Building in New York City.<sup>6</sup> In 1823 he produced a second design for the area, but slightly less aggrandizing. Similarly, in 1909 Bruno Schmitz created a series of studies for Kaiser Wilhelm II, depicting an ordered Roman forum on Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz with gothic arcades adorning the façades of the surrounding buildings and statues and monuments adding heavy religious and civic symbolism to the massive architectural vision.<sup>7</sup> In 1929, as traffic had increasingly become a problem on the site, Martin Wagner, at the time Berlin's municipal building surveyor, designed a plan that included a traffic roundabout the diameter of which was one hundred meters, with pedestrians occupying the street level, trains beneath and automobiles above. The gigantic four-storey system was to be crowned with a large brightly lit café.<sup>8</sup> Though none of these plans were ever realized, they do set a precedent for monumentalism on Potsdamer Platz that is reflected in the contemporary development.

In the early twentieth century, Potsdamer Platz emerged in the international imaginary as a focal point for the rich marriage of modern technology, art and architecture that helped to define Berlin as “metropolis,” indelibly penned, drawn, brushed, photographed and filmed by a multitude of prominent individuals and groups. The area was transformed into an over encoded ensemble of movement and stimuli, akin to Georg Simmel's description of metropolitan experience as “...the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.”<sup>9</sup> His fascination with tempo,

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<sup>6</sup> Balfour, Alan, *Berlin: The Politics of Order, 1737-1989* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Balfour, Alan, *Berlin: The Politics of Order, 1737-1989*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Wilderotter, Hans, “Potsdamer Platz,” in *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architektur für das neue Berlin*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Simmel, Georg, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *Simmel on Culture*, eds., David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 175.

the pulsating, mechanical rhythm of the city and its intellectually exhausting “psychic life”<sup>10</sup> are depicted in Walter Ruttmann’s iconic 1927 film *Berlin: Die Symphonie der Großstadt*. With a cinematic industrialized cadence of human movement, automobiles, trains and commercial activity, the film presents Berlin as a series of frenetic images at twenty-four frames per second, prominently featuring Potsdamer Platz, though its form is often indiscernible through the constant volley of traffic. The film’s script was itself a felicitous representation of the metropolis, consisting entirely of mathematical, photographic, graphical and literary signs.<sup>11</sup>

The visual language of surface culture that characterized Berlin in the decade following the first World War is chronicled by Janet Ward who documents the transformation of the Berlin experience from “idle *flanerie* into distraction with an applied purpose”<sup>12</sup> through the city’s indulgence in electric advertising, which invaded not only the streets but also architecture itself, as *Lichtarchitektur*: “This ‘architecture of light’ developed as the architecture of pure façade in both the literal and metaphorical sense, for here structure was built with the single intent of advertising.”<sup>13</sup> During this period, Potsdamer Platz featured prominently such vestiges of modernism as Mendelsohn’s famed Columbushaus (fig. 5) and the Telschow Haus, and was home to the fantastical Kempinski Haus Vaterland (fig. 6), the Hotel Esplanade and Palast Hotel. Alan Balfour, in his consideration of Potsdamer Platz of the late 1920s notes that, “Architecture, history’s most forceful instrument of permanence, disintegrates into commodification along with all else,”<sup>14</sup> signaling the ubiquity of Weimar era’s culture of mass consumption.

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<sup>10</sup> Simmel, Georg, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *Simmel on Culture*, 175.

<sup>11</sup> Scherpe, Klaus R. and Mitch Cohen, “Modern and Postmodern Transformations of the Metropolitan Narrative,” *New German Critique* 55 (Winter, 1992): 78.

<sup>12</sup> Ward, Janet, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 101.

<sup>13</sup> Ward, Janet, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*, 112.

<sup>14</sup> Balfour, Alan, *Berlin: The Politics of Order, 1737-1989*, 57.

This vibrant synthesis of urbanism, architecture and advertising extended well into the 1930s, but as many of the most successful businesses were owned and operated by Jewish proprietors,<sup>15</sup> the rise of National Socialism and Hitler's anti-Semitic policies gradually culled the area's dynamism. Between the megalomaniac plans of Nazi architect Albert Speer, allied bombing and the general destruction that accompanies warfare, World War II eventually rendered Potsdamer Platz a stolid and empty wasteland. Conditions fared little better after the war, although small pockets of life did spring up in and around the area, but these were again short-lived as construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 diametrically sliced the dilapidated site. In the following months the rubble was cleared on both sides making room for the death strip in the east, and the Kulturforum and tourist viewing platform to the west.<sup>16</sup> In a matter of decades Potsdamer Platz went from cultural capital to complete void, no longer Ruttmann's vision of movement, the site's barren landscape garnered a new image, as the snow covered vacuity in Wim Wender's film *Wings of Desire*.

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<sup>15</sup> The popular Haus Vaterland was one of these establishments, the owner and operator of which eventually became dispossessed of his property.

<sup>16</sup> Wilderotter, Hans, "Potsdamer Platz," in *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architektur für das neue Berlin*, 25-26.

#### 4.0 THE ARCHITECTURAL IMAGE

For twenty-eight years, Potsdamer Platz remained relatively unchanged, until November 9th, 1989. The fall of the wall ushered in unprecedented interest in the area from a variety of parties comprised mainly of politicians, city officials, developers, planners and architects, as a sizable portion of undeveloped land opened up right in the center of the city. The entirety of Potsdamer Platz, at the time owned by the city government of Berlin, was parceled off and sold to three international corporations, Daimler-Benz (now DaimlerChrysler), Sony and Asea Brown Boveri, for a fraction of the land value. This corporate windfall was followed by a number of controversial competitions, the first of which went to the Munich architects Hilmer and Sattler for their area master plan championing the tenets of critical reconstruction, the foundations of which were based on Prussian era building and elements of the traditional European city. The ensuing competition for the Daimler-Benz property included a roster of fourteen internationally renowned architects, with the winning team of Renzo Piano and Christoph Kohlbecker selected for their nineteen building complex that included a piazza, musical theater, exhibition pavilion and water features.<sup>17</sup> Designs for individual buildings were subsequently split up and distributed to finalists and other competitors, including Hans Kollhoff, Rafael Moneo, Arata Isozaki, Richard Rogers, Ulrike Lauber and Wolfram Wöhr. The site's towers however, were reserved

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<sup>17</sup> Enke, Roland, "Missed Opportunities?" in *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architektur für das neue Berlin*, eds. Yamin von Rauch and Jochen Visscher (Berlin: Jovis Verlagsbüro, 2000), 40.

for Piano and Kollhoff. Commenting on the complexity of the quarter, Piano notes “it’s not about making buildings; it’s about making a piece of a city,”<sup>18</sup> and the description on Piano’s website similarly posits the goal of the project “to recreate a lively city centre, well integrated to the rest of the city and harmonious in the use of materials.”<sup>19</sup>

The selection process for the adjoining sites on Potsdamer Platz followed much the same pattern. After a smaller competition involving only seven individuals, Sony chose the talents of the German-American architect Helmut Jahn. As opposed to the fractured DaimlerChrysler plan, Jahn remained the exclusive designer of the Sony complex, although initially attempts were made at dividing the site amongst several architects.<sup>20</sup> The glass and steel complex was formulated around an inner plaza surrounded by commercial venues and topped with a tent like canopy to provide shade and protection from the elements. Unlike the DaimlerChrysler design, Jahn included no internal streets, only large pedestrian entrances, and all parking was relegated to a garage underneath the center. His website describes the concept of the Sony Center as “not a building, but a part of the city. External is the ‘real’ city; internal is the ‘virtual’ city,”<sup>21</sup> emphasizing the technological experience and concluding the “Sony Center is a Kulturforum for the millennium.”<sup>22</sup> The final components of Potsdamer Platz were drawn up after Asea Brown Boveri selected the Italian architect Giorgio Grassi for their portion, and Hilmer and Sattler themselves were chosen to develop the remaining piece of land adjacent to the Sony Center, now

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<sup>18</sup> Larson, Soren, “Pritzker Winning Renzo Piano Plays Music on an Urban Stage,” *Architectural Record* 186:5 (May 1998): 75.

<sup>19</sup> Piano, Renzo, *Renzo Piano Building Workshop*, 2008, 14 April 2008 < <http://www.rpbw.com/>>

<sup>20</sup> Enke, Roland, “Missed Opportunities?” in *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architektur für das neue Berlin*, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Jahn, Helmut, *Murphy/Jahn, Inc. Architects*, 2005, 14 April 2008

<[http://www.murphyjahn.com/english/frameset\\_intro.htm](http://www.murphyjahn.com/english/frameset_intro.htm)>

<sup>22</sup> Jahn, Helmut, *Murphy/Jahn, Inc. Architects*, 2005, 14 April 2008

<[http://www.murphyjahn.com/english/frameset\\_intro.htm](http://www.murphyjahn.com/english/frameset_intro.htm)>

known as the Beisheim Center, in cooperation with David Chipperfield (see fig. 7 for a plan of the new Potsdamer Platz).



## 5.0 THE CRITICAL IMAGE

The critical reception of Potsdamer Platz reached its height slightly after the controversial competitions. The overt prominence of international corporations in the planning phase was spurned by critics as undemocratic, and rightfully so; the haste with which city officials and developers moved to attract global businesses and revitalize the center of Berlin effectively circumvented the public's participation. The blatant speed of the competition and planning phase, coupled with the overall massive scale of the project, led many to question the city's desire to fill the void at its center. One of the first authors to confront the city's obsession with image creation through architecture on Potsdamer Platz was Andreas Huyssen, who, in his seminal text "The Voids of Berlin" states: "the major concern in developing and rebuilding key sites in the heart of Berlin seems to be with image rather than use, attractiveness for tourists and official visitors rather than heterogeneous living space for Berlin's inhabitants, erasure of memory rather than its imaginative preservation."<sup>23</sup> Writing a year prior to the completion of the DaimlerChrysler quarter in 1998, Huyssen's speculation regarding the finished site is decidedly abject, and his negative discussion of the redevelopment of Potsdamer Platz as image in the service of tourist consumerism functions more to provide a contrast with his underlying support of architecture as historical narrative, culminating with a discussion that celebrates Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum. Huyssen does not consider Potsdamer Platz on its own terms and

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<sup>23</sup> Huyssen, Andreas, "The Voids of Berlin," *Critical Inquiry* 24:1 (Autumn 1997): 66.

his article set the tone for much of the subsequent scholarship concerning the site. While acknowledging the existence of multiple images inherent in the redevelopment efforts, essentially that of critical reconstruction<sup>24</sup> pitted against corporate internationalism, he concludes that the difference between the competing image politics is unimportant. As he notes: “this dichotomy of stone age versus cyber age is misleading: the fight is over image and image alone,”<sup>25</sup> singular, not plural. Howard Caygill, briefly chronicling the political turmoil surrounding the redevelopment of the site in an article titled “The Futures of Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz” begins from a different perspective than Huyssen, but arrives at surprisingly similar conclusions. Caygill describes the images of the new Potsdamer Platz as “a scene spliced together from *Blade Runner* and Schinkel’s Memorial Arch,”<sup>26</sup> with “No hint of the past, instead a hygienic environment policed by corporate capital. This could have been anywhere,”<sup>27</sup> again positing a series of images that are ultimately dismissed in favor of one denigrating classifier.

Allan Cochrane in “Making Up Meanings in a Capital City,” dedicates an entire section of his study of Berlin’s redefinition as the capital of Germany to what he terms “The new architecture of Power.”<sup>28</sup> Potsdamer Platz is only featured briefly, but its mode of presentation is worth noting, as Cochrane selects two quotes from Brian Ladd that simply dismiss the new

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<sup>24</sup> Critical reconstruction, an architectural design approach introduced in the 1970s by the German architect Josef Paul Kleihues and architectural critic Dieter Hoffman-Axthelm, stresses historical interpretation and transcription in rebuilding efforts. Generally, the main tenets are professed as a return to the European street plan, small block sizes, traditional materials and building height limits. For a more detailed synopsis see Gavriel Rosenfeld, “The Architects Debate,” *Passing into History: Nazism and the Holocaust Beyond Memory*, and Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*.

<sup>25</sup> Huyssen, Andreas, “The Voids of Berlin,” *Critical Inquiry*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> Caygill, Howard, “The Futures of Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz,” in *The Limits of Globalization: Cases and Arguments*, Alan Scott, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 53.

<sup>27</sup> Caygill, Howard, “The Futures of Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz,” in *The Limits of Globalization: Cases and Arguments*, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Cochrane, Allan, “Making Up Meanings in a Capital City. Power, Memory, and Monuments in Berlin,” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 13/1 (2006): 10.

Potsdamer Platz as conservative historical Disneyfication,<sup>29</sup> and augments this with his own analysis categorizing the site as “temples to consumption, entertainment and corporate power.”<sup>30</sup> His choice of quotations and signifiers embodies the essence of Potsdamer Platz as superficial image, and written nearly ten years after the articles by Huyssen and Caygill, attests to the lasting power this image has had in critical rhetoric following the completion of the entire development in 2004. Even Werner Sewing’s partially experiential analysis of the DaimlerChrysler quarter capitulates that “in reality Potsdamer Platz is a location for the production of urban images.”<sup>31</sup> Sewing’s rather cavalier article similarly equates Potsdamer Platz with Disneyland, describing it as “a theme park in which big-city motifs are presented within the pedestrian-friendly, nearly automobile-free idyll of a small town.”<sup>32</sup>

This concept of the urban theme park illuminates the only notable division within the critically propagated image of Potsdamer Platz, that of the commodification of history, a technique museums have employed for decades but is still debated with regard to architectural redevelopments. Critics such as Huyssen and Caygill castigate the “erasure of history” on Potsdamer Platz, and Huyssen notes that although Berlin is quite renowned for its museum collections, its polycentric nature renders it “much less liable to turn into an urban museum space such as the centers of Rome, Paris, and even London have become in recent decades.”<sup>33</sup> The opposing camp, specifically those that champion the Disneyfication trope, contend the commodification of history along with architecture on Potsdamer Platz, generating what Frank

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<sup>29</sup> Ladd, Brian, quoted in Cochrane, Allan, “Making Up Meanings in a Capital City. Power, Memory, and Monuments in Berlin,” *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Cochrane, Allan, “Making Up Meanings in a Capital City. Power, Memory, and Monuments in Berlin,” *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Sewing, Werner, “Heart, Artificial Heart, or Theme Park?” in *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architektur für das neue Berlin*, eds. Yamin von Rauch and Jochen Visscher (Berlin: Jovis Verlagsbüro, 2000), 57.

<sup>32</sup> Sewing, Werner, “Heart, Artificial Heart, or Theme Park?” in *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architektur für das neue Berlin*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Huyssen, Andreas, “The Voids of Berlin,” *Critical Inquiry*, 59.

Roost has labeled “a new form of urbanity in Berlin that turns the city center into an object for tourist consumption.”<sup>34</sup>

This “new form of urbanity,” essentially the entertainment industry’s appropriation of large urban tracts for the broadcasting of their identities through product and spectacle, has led to comparisons of Potsdamer Platz with New York City’s Times Square (fig. 8, 9). And in actuality, the two follow a similar program of revitalization through international corporate investment, although Potsdamer Platz additionally required the rebuilding of its entire urban environment, whereas Times Square only necessitated renovation. However, in comparing the two frequently termed ‘tourist destinations’ a glaring visual contradiction arises in the form of advertising. The ultra-bright, supra-saturated Times Square overflowing with a wealth of video installations, images and illuminated texts contrasts starkly with the comparatively barren cityscape of Potsdamer Platz (fig. 10, 11). Where Times Square relegates buildings to the periphery as support for its masses of signage and screens, Potsdamer Platz presents architecture at the forefront, its three high-rises the emblematic picture postcard of the area. It is this visual discrepancy between Potsdamer Platz and Times Square and between the new Potsdamer Platz and its Weimar era precursor that crystallizes the importance of the development’s architecture. For Potsdamer Platz presents *architecture* as image, in semiotic terms as both sign and signifier. This is the reason why a comprehensive architectural analysis is of such paramount importance, as it will reveal the rich contradictions that inform the identities of the opposing structures.

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<sup>34</sup> Roost, Frank, “Recreating the City as Entertainment Center: the Media Industry’s Role in Transforming Potsdamer Platz and Times Square,” *Journal of Urban Technology* 5/3 (Dec. 1998): 11.

## 6.0 THE MATERIAL IMAGE

Standing on the edge of Leipziger Platz, facing the new development as it is so often two-dimensionally represented, a choice is presented between the bordering buildings (fig. 8). Left leads to the DaimlerChrysler quarter, while to the right the Sony Center. Following the former course, past a red stairway installation celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the viewer is presented with an avenue decorated with parked automobiles and trees, paved in asphalt, cobblestones and concrete, warmly lit, albeit somewhat empty of human life (fig. 12). The sidewalks are encroached upon by a ubiquitous covered walkway that spans the length of the street, horizontally leveling one's perception. The windows offer little visual consolation, devoid almost entirely of text or displays, and at certain points are completely dark or covered up from the inside. The glow emanating from the Arkaden's main entrance welcomes visitors, its recessed three-storey glass façade unobtrusively adorned with the word 'Arkaden' in large red letters and lit from the inside by a repeating series of transverse fluorescence (fig. 13). The interior, however, is merely a roofed extension of the exterior, the same covered walkway seamlessly integrated in storied fashion. No effort has been made to mask the sizable register of the building's ochre colored outer cladding visible above the third level beneath the glass ceiling, the multistoried thoroughfare supported by the banal grey columns that pervade the complex's entirety (fig. 14).

Here there is little semblance of a global, national, or for that matter local Berlin image. Even the filmic moniker adopted by Ward and Sewing of “stage-set” to describe the incorporation of the critical reconstructionist tenets in the design as producing the “impression of fake spatial completion and historical cohesion”<sup>35</sup> does not accurately define the space, as Richard Roger’s massive mechanical, piston shaped supports render the historical principles simply dimensional guidelines and models for street layout (fig. 15). The lone historical fragment in the DaimlerChrysler complex, Weinhaus Huth (fig. 16), alternatively offers a contrasting architectural complexity to the homogenous and rather simplistic façades characterizing much of the development, and its attention to detail affords the building a more human scale, a quality noticeably absent from the new structures. Large expanses of unadorned windowless walls and the lack of dynamism in the stretches penetrated by glass attribute to the buildings of the DaimlerChrysler quarter a sense of proportion much larger than is actually the case (fig. 17). This discrepancy in scale, coupled with the defensiveness of the spaces pulled back from the street and up above the pedestrian, the internalization of activities and opacity of materials, all suggest a medieval fortification rather than a tourist destination, a corporate castle on Potsdamer Platz. Kollhoff’s tower on the square is even capped with a crenellated battlement, and for two and a half Euros one can take what is called Europe’s fastest elevator to the top of the gatehouse and gaze out through wrought iron bars at Mitte, the Kulturforum, or into the smiling façade of Jahn’s Sony Center next door (fig. 18)

It is this ambiguity, this conflict between the perceived commercial capacity embedded in the redevelopment proposals and its architectural actualization, between the existing shopping and entertainment facilities and their mode of architectural presence, which attests to the

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<sup>35</sup> Ward, Janet, “Las Vegas on the Spree: The Americanization of New Berlin,” in *Visual Culture in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 93.

complicated nature of the DaimlerChrysler quarter. The chosen guise functions less as a mask than as an identity in itself. Moreover, the medieval affinity to which the architecture and spatial dynamics are attuned contrast with their suggested tourist-centric mission, presenting a significant divergence from the critically held image of Potsdamer Platz. This deviance is supported and consequently accentuated by the Sony Center's unabashed celebration of spectacular architecture, which appears palatial in opposition to the DaimlerChrysler quarter's sometimes castle like oppressiveness.

Sony's directives called for an "architectural composition of high artistic merit, one that would contribute to both Berlin's urban and Sony's corporate identity."<sup>36</sup> However, the initial plans were met with dubious reception, and once complete, the building was classed simply as corporate bravado. The large internal plaza garnered numerous speculative criticisms, dubbed an "overtly commercial quasi-public space"<sup>37</sup> by Kathleen James-Chakraborty, and "Jahn's happy tent"<sup>38</sup> by Huyssen. Chakraborty also notes, however, that the somewhat clearer representation of its underlying commercial function renders the Sony Center "less manipulative"<sup>39</sup> than its neighboring complex,<sup>40</sup> and this is manifested through the site's architecture. The glittering compound is a tribute to technology and consumerism, visually engaging the visitor with variegated brightly lit glass and steel encircling the forum, its circular motion sweeping them toward any one of a number of Sony operated stores, cinemas or leased spaces (fig. 19, 20). Contrasting the DaimlerChrysler complex's opacity and shadow, the Sony Center's architecture is one of transparency and light. An ever-changing colored glow illuminates the Kaisersaal

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<sup>36</sup> Enke, Roland, "Missed Opportunities?" in *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architektur für das neue Berlin*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> James-Chakraborty, Kathleen, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 132.

<sup>38</sup> Huyssen, Andreas, "The Voids of Berlin," *Critical Inquiry*, 59.

<sup>39</sup> James-Chakraborty, Kathleen, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience*, 132.

<sup>40</sup> James-Chakraborty, Kathleen, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience*, 132.

breakfast room, moved within the site during construction (fig. 21). At night, bars of light embedded in the ground mimic the lines of a highway and guide the tech-savvy pilgrims to the ghostly blue membrane resting atop the gleaming ovoid walls (fig. 22). Much as archaic palaces were architectural celebrations of their proprietor's wealth and power, so the Sony Center celebrates its corporate stature through the cohesion of architectural spectacle on Potsdamer Platz, inviting the passerby to gaze at its curved tower, colored lights or glowing carapace. The varying geometry of the structure adds movement to the interconnected series of buildings, large openings directing crowds in and out of the center. The forum's space is one of congregation, of leisure, in direct opposition to the Arkaden's thoroughfare, which marginalizes the consumers' experience by relegating them to perpetual axial movement. The grey columns, so pronounced throughout the DaimlerChrysler quarter, are incorporated quietly into the glass façades and steel structure of the Sony Center, and instead of covered walkways and sheltered entrances, Sony's two and three storey consumer spaces protrude outwards onto the forum, lit brightest of all (fig. 23).

The Sony Center's curved tower and media-centric qualities even suggest remnants of one of Potsdamer Platz's original occupants, Kempinski Haus Vaterland. The German equivalent of Coney Island, Haus Vaterland's cylindrical form housed fantastical recreations of varying cultural locales from differing countries, as well as a café and cinema, and assisted in initiating what was subsequently known as *Amerikanismus*, the "thoughtful imitation of American models."<sup>41</sup> The Sony Center's cinemas follow in the same tradition, playing mostly English language films shipped direct from Hollywood, and its design has been purported as copying the "American urban model of the entertainment, leisure or shopping centre as one

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<sup>41</sup> Green, Roger, "The City and its Entertainment: Coney Island and Haus Vaterland", in *Berlin/New York: Like and Unlike, Essays on Architecture and Art from 1870 to the Present*, 211-213.



large, enclosed single-architect building.”<sup>42</sup> However, this vague historical correspondence is decidedly different from the DaimlerChrysler complex’s attempt at ersatz continuity through prescribed guidelines. In essence, Jahn’s intentional disregard for the critical reconstructionist maxims renders the Sony Center, not only in design but in spirit as well, more akin to its Modernist Weimar era predecessors on Potsdamer Platz (Mendelsohn’s Columbushaus) than any one of its current neighbors, even slightly resembling Ward’s description of *Lichtarchitektur*. The tensions exhibited during the Weimar period between Prussian-inspired and Modernist architecture reappear subtly in the discourse initiated by the DaimlerChrysler quarter’s traditional pre-modern style and the Sony Center’s glass and steel.

Stepping back, however, reveals yet another set of tensions, this time competing within each site and similar in nature. The skyscrapers that protrude onto the square pose a contradiction to the much shorter, and much larger, attached complexes of buildings extending westward (see fig. 7, 8 and 24). From the original vantage point on Leipziger Platz, the foreground, the American high-rise model challenges the background, the traditional Berlin architecture of eight or nine stories, the three tallest structures redefining the 1920s epithet “Chicago on the Spree.”<sup>43</sup> Just as the identities of Kirchner’s women vacillate on an individual basis in addition to the discord apparent between them, so too, the tension between the American and Berlin architectural frameworks within the DaimlerChrysler quarter and Sony Center are at odds with the functions they encapsulate. The towers house mostly office and residential spaces,

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<sup>42</sup> Watson, Howard, “Berlin’s Empty Heart,” *Architectural Design*, 102.

<sup>43</sup> Ward, Janet, “Las Vegas on the Spree: The Americanization of New Berlin,” in *Visual Culture in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 96.

while the imported Americanized models of consumerism are found in the larger sectors defined by the more typical Berlin building style meant to blend with the existing cityscape.

Pulling out even further, the architectural language of new Potsdamer Platz also resembles that in Kirchner's painting, the forms of the contemporary plan and buildings exhibited in the 1914 work by the respective figures and the abstracted shapes exuding from beneath their feet. It is a language of geometry, a collection of curves, trapezoids and triangles rising upon similarly shaped lots, broken and bent by streets. The land allocations in the new development form anomalous quadrilaterals, and, from above, their unequal angles and incongruous sides still remain at odds with the precise octagonal inscription of Leipziger Platz. An aerial view remains the only way to gather the original intent of Potsdamer Platz as it was conceived in plan, clockwise from left as the four separate developments of the A+T complex, DaimlerChrysler quarter, Sony Center and Beisheim Center (fig. 25). At eye level the new structures on the edge of Leipziger Platz push Grassi's A+T complex to the periphery (fig. 26), and Hilmer and Sattler's Beisheim Center sits quietly in the wings, a notably "more conservative development than its neighbors,"<sup>44</sup> its cream limestone unspectacular next to the gleaming Sony Center<sup>45</sup> (fig. 27). The Bahnhof stations are perfect grids, their rectilinear orthogonal geometry, structure and materials pointedly saluting Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie, only a short distance away (fig. 28). The traffic, once again volleying through the repaved intersection, channels the onlooker's perspective between the DaimlerChrysler complex and Sony Center down Potsdamerstrasse, but is unable to reconcile the architecture along the street with the blank horizon hovering over the Kulturforum.

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<sup>44</sup> Watson, Howard, "Berlin's Empty Heart," *Architectural Design* 76 no. 3 (May – June 2006): 101.

<sup>45</sup> Watson, Howard, "Berlin's Empty Heart," *Architectural Design*, 101.

Where Leipziger Platz frames the viewer's gaze, the Kulturforum facilitates the exact opposite. The low rambling wilderness of trees, parking lots and sloping structures abuts Potsdamer Platz on its western edge. It presents a similar discontinuity as that of Leipziger Platz, substituting architectural and planning precision, however, for random geometries and organic structure. Six lanes of traffic separate the flat, glass exterior of the Sony Center from Hans Scharoun's sprawling giant, the Berlin Philharmonie, accentuating the sense of edge between the two developments (fig. 29). Across Potsdamerstrasse, Piano's casino and nightclub loosely mimic Scharoun's angled rooflines and the horizontal fenestrations of the adjacent Staatsbibliothek. Only a small alley splits the two buildings – a more successful attempt at integration than Sony's glass precipice. The division, however, between the Kulturforum and the densely reconstructed Potsdamer Platz remains palpably evident. The initial role of the frame attributed to Leipziger Platz is transferred as one travels the length of Potsdamerstrasse to the DaimlerChrysler and Sony buildings lining the street, which in turn frame the open, tree clad expanse of the Kulturforum.

Sandwiched amid these two discrete nodes, Leipziger Platz and the Kulturforum, each characteristically different, Potsdamer Platz similarly adopts the atmosphere of a separate zone, self contained and delineated on either side. The intentions of the architects to create a piece or part of the city on Potsdamer Platz have often been construed as a failure, evidenced by the absence of cohesion between the new development and the existing areas. Howard Watson laments that the Kulturforum has “not been intelligently linked to the reborn cultural centre of Potsdamer Platz,”<sup>46</sup> and Roost describes the new area as “reflecting an economic, social and spatial structure that [are] completely different from the diversity that characterizes Berlin's

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<sup>46</sup> Watson, Howard, “Berlin's Empty Heart,” *Architectural Design*, 102.

other districts.”<sup>47</sup> But Berlin, throughout its history, has been a polycentric city. Pariser Platz, the area around the Zoologischer Bahnhof, Alexanderplatz; all are distinct locations with varying architectures and reputations. The Brandenburg Gate, the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche and Zoo station, the Fernsehturm or TV tower, the defining elements of each aforementioned node are now joined by the three towers of Piano, Kollhoff and Jahn, all symbols of time and place. Inadvertently perhaps, the architects may have indeed fulfilled their goal of creating a piece of the city, a fragment, on Potsdamer Platz.

Though no work by a single author can encompass the enormity of such a development, Kirchner’s painting acutely attends both historically and contemporaneously to the multitude of tensions and ambiguities present on Potsdamer Platz. It highlights the necessity for a closer inspection of the oft chagrined and superficially cast site, which, upon examination, is ultimately defined by discord and fragmentation rather than singular classifiers or images. Popular image, historical image, architectural image, critical image; the material image of Potsdamer Platz is all of these, and now complete, must be evaluated on its own terms. It is a piece of the city, isolated and integrated, interiorized and extroverted, a layered synthesis of local, national and international images, both real and imaginary. Historical and historicizing, codified yet dissonant, plural, not individual – *this* is the image. *This* is Potsdamer Platz.

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<sup>47</sup> Roost, Frank, “Recreating the City as Entertainment Center: the Media Industry’s Role in Transforming Potsdamer Platz and Times Square,” *Journal of Urban Technology*, 17.



**Figure 1: Leipziger Platz, looking into Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009**



**Figure 2: Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009**



Figure 3: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Potsdamer Platz*, oil on canvas, 1914 ([hyperlink](#))

Figure 4: Leipziger Platz and Potsdamer Platz, aerial view, Berlin circa 1900 ([hyperlink](#))



Figure 5: Erich Mendelsohn's *Columbushaus*, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin circa 1932



Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-13081  
Foto: o. Ang. / Juli 1932

Figure 6: Kempinski Haus Vaterland, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 1919

# POTSDAMER PLATZ, BERLIN 2009

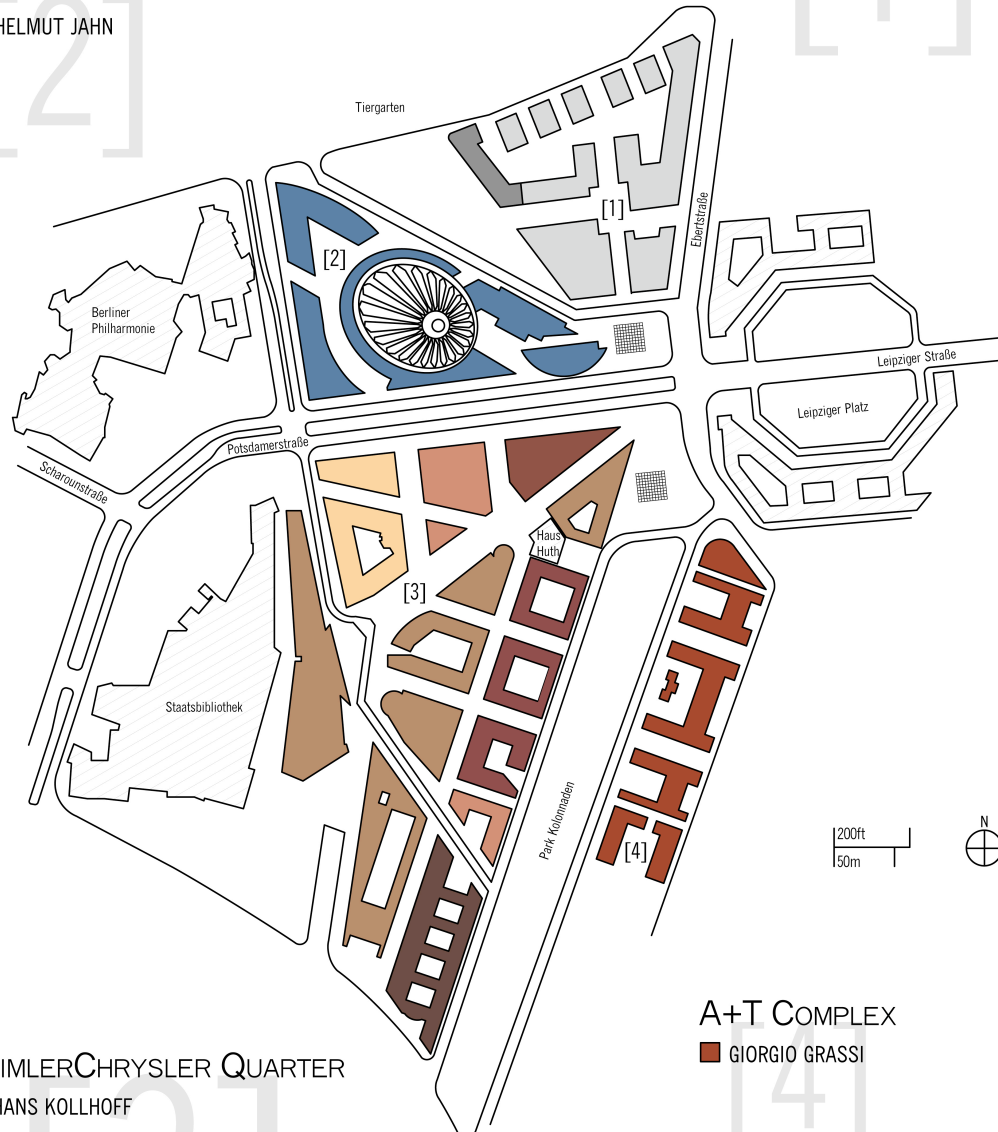
## SONY CENTER

■ HELMUT JAHN

## BEISHEIM CENTER

■ HEINZ HILMER &  
CHRISTOPH SATTLER

■ DAVID CHIPPERFIELD



## DAIMLERCHRYSLER QUARTER

■ HANS KOLLHOFF

■ ULRIKE LAUBER & WOLFRAM WÖHR

■ RAFAEL MONEO

■ RENZO PIANO &  
CHRISTOPH KOHLBECKER

■ RICHARD ROGERS

■ ARATA ISOZAKI

## A+T COMPLEX

■ GIORGIO GRASSI

Figure 7: Drafted plan of Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009





Figure 8: Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009



Figure 9: Times Square, New York City 2009





Figure 10: Times Square, New York City 2009



Figure 11: Times Square, New York City 2009





Figure 12: Alte Potsdamer Strasse, DaimlerChrysler Quarter, Berlin 2009



Figure 13: Arkaden Main Entrance, DaimlerChrysler Quarter, Berlin 2009





**Figure 14: Arkaden Interior, DaimlerChrysler Quarter, Berlin 2009**



**Figure 15: Richard Rogers' Office Block, DaimlerChrysler Quarter, Berlin 2009**





Figure 16: Weinhaus Huth, DaimlerChrysler Quarter, Berlin 2009



Figure 17: Interior Avenue, DaimlerChrysler Quarter, Berlin 2009





**Figure 18: Sony Center Tower, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009**



**Figure 19: Sony Center Forum, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009**



**Figure 20: Sony Center Forum, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009**



**Figure 21: Kaisersaal Breakfast Room, Sony Center, Berlin 2009**





Figure 22: Sony Center Forum, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009



Figure 23: Sony Center Forum, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009





**Figure 24: Sony Center viewed from the Kulturforum, Berlin 2009**



**Figure 25: Aerial view of Potsdamer Platz, Berlin circa 2005**





**Figure 26: A+T Complex, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009**



**Figure 27: Beisheim Center and Sony Center, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009**





**Figure 28: Potsdamer Bahnhof, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2009**



**Figure 29: Ben-Gurion-Strasse, Potsdamer Platz / Kulturforum, Berlin 2009**

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